

If you prefer novels that provide respite from the hurley-burley then "The Tortilla Curtain" by T. C. Boyle isn't for you. Boyle's narrative is a mirror. It reflects an image of us that our rose-tinted glasses might otherwise filter. The setting is contemporary California, but the themes are the same as those tackled by John Steinbeck in "Grapes of Wrath."

Boyle, like Steinbeck, is prolific. "Tortilla Curtain" is his eleventh book and it contains two parallel stories that alternate chapter by chapter using a technique reminiscent of Steinbeck.

In one story, Delaney Mossbacher lives a privileged existence in a gated community outside Los Angeles. He lives with his second wife, her son, two dogs and a cat amidst like-minded wealthy whites. Mossbacher and his neighbours have fled from their former neighbourhoods which are being inundated, not with Oakies, but with dark-skinned immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The site for their euphemistically named community, Arroyo Blanco, on the arid chaparrals surrounding LA, is exceptionally unsuited for human occupation. The summers are sweltering. Autumn is cursed with windstorms and penetrating grit. In the winter, the chaparral turns into a tinderbox swept by regular bush fires. Spring rains bring landslides. The environment is home to surly opossums, antisocial rattlesnakes and conniving coyotes all of which clash with the residents of Arroyo Blanco. Human technology is no match for nature and millions of years of evolution.

Boyle's parallel story, traces the hapless misery of an illegal Mexican immigrant couple, Candido and America, as they fight for every breath of air, every sip of water and every mouthful of food. They work for meagre wages which are not paid, stolen or burned. They suffer every indignity. Intermittently and quite literally they collide with Mossbacher and draw the two stories together.

With each collision, the veneer covering Mossbacher's true values crumbles. In the end, Mossbacher is transformed into the antithesis of all that he initially espouses, while the Mexicans are able, in spite of their wretched poverty, to retain a semblance of humanity.

Humanity is a major theme. The treatment afforded to pets and dogs locked cars is superior to the treatment meted to illegals. Initially, Mossbacher espouses a profound reverence for nature and all life including illegal immigrants. He is tolerated as eccentric for his tree-hugging Liberal values, but derided for his compassion towards Mexicans. Boyle, is kinder to the Mexicans, but he explores their biases too.

Boyle contrasts obscene excess with debilitating shortage. He shows that there is plenty, and he laments unequal distribution.

Faith is another theme. The Mexicans have values deeply rooted in their faith and families which carry them through tribulations that would have finished Job. Mossbacher and his gated neighbours are also monotheistic. Money is their deity, capital appreciation is their creed and brand loyalty is their holy sacrament. Everything has a price. All relationships are economic. Thanksgiving, ranked as a hot day for real estate sales, is a day to display.

Justice follows two paths. For white-collar criminals, sentences are served in the opulent comfort of their homes. For captured illegals who did nothing more than the work nobody else wanted, justice is beatings, jail and packed buses back to Mexico.

"Tortilla Curtain" is an eminently readable fictionalized account of reality. It tosses back an unflattering image of the shallowness and depersonalizing greed of North American, shopping mall, culture. It describes the insufferable hardships suffered routinely by illegals in exchange for a kick at a better life. It's a rap on our knuckles to open our eyes and our hearts.